

Gandy Dancer Archives

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 2

12-1-2016

I Don't Buy It

Jason Birkelbach
SUNY Oneonta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Birkelbach, Jason (2016) "I Don't Buy It," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol5/iss1/2>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gandy Dancer Archives by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.

JASON BIRKELBACH

I Don't Buy It

I first noticed the man for his massive size—then for the massive bongo drum he carried. His body filled the entire subway door. He twisted and ducked to slide through. Janet and I had been enjoying the peace of the 7 Line, the hum of the riders, the percussion of the tracks, but I knew that drum would shatter it all.

The drum was the size of a small garbage can. The top was covered with an animal hide that was stretched atop the drum's wooden body, which tapered down to its open bottom. Laces of green, yellow, and red were strung along its sides, through its head, crossing, weaving, and revealing only small patches of the body's natural grain.

The subway had become crowded as it pulled us closer to the stadium. We sat at the opposite end, pressed shoulder to shoulder with other riders. Janet sat to my left. The air was hot and thick that day, but the subway, with only a wispy, cool draft, felt luxurious.

The train emerged from the underground. The sunlight pierced the windows and glimmered the sweat beading on the man's bald forehead while he hobbled through the crowd, holding the bongo beneath his left arm. His eyelids hung over his pupils like half-closed blinds. His face was idle. He settled beside the side door where the ceiling curved downward. His head nearly scraped it.

"Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, if I can have your attention please," the man said. His voice was deep and resounded without strain. "Me and my family have fallen on hard times. Every single day we struggle to scrape together meals. Please take some time to help those less fortunate, those in need. Thank you."

He squatted with the drum tilted forward between his legs, and he held his left hand over its head. The hand looked like tree bark. He stared. He

waited. I waited too. I looked away and I wished that our stop would arrive before the sound.

But then he played.

The first beat rattled my ears. It was a firecracker, and more rolled and snapped off his fingertips. The rhythm bounded forward. He struck accents that swept up and down and in between. He tapped the drum's edges, and the pings dissolved the empty spaces. The sound flooded the car. It splashed along the walls. He played loudly, yet no one turned; no one watched. He pounded the drum again. Again. Again. The salvo shook my brain.

Janet tugged my arm, clutched it, and cringed.

"I don't like it," she said. "It hurts my head."

"I'm sure he'll stop soon," I said.

"No he won't," she said. "He'll just go and annoy more people, and they'll only care about getting him to stop. Why can't he just get a job? I can't respect that."

With my arm around her waist, I pulled her close, and she pressed her right ear into my shoulder. The drum still rumbled.

I looked back at the man. His stoicism had faltered and reemerged as ardor. His eyes were closed, and his head was tilted back while gravity parted his lips. As he bobbed with the beat, his teeth gleamed. His ears seemed spared from the noise. I imagined that the constant pounding had dulled the ringing pain deep in his brain. He was numb. In time, we all were.

And for a moment, when the noise no longer hurt, I could see each thud and pop move the air. The rhythm was real and surrounded us, but it felt far away, as though it were filmed in a studio.

Then the man opened his eyes, and his calm returned as he softened each pop. His fingers were now pattering and the noise soon faded. Then he looked at me. It felt cold. I shot my eyes forward at the opposite bench onto a man who was staring at his phone. I glanced to his right and then farther down, and then to the left. The riders' sights were affixed downward, staring at nothing. Their bodies were bound to the floor and to the benches, and they moved only by the will of the subway.

The man stood, and he constrained the bongo beneath his arm. His eyes were dimmer than before.

"Thank you again," he said. "I hope I entertained you. Remember some people in this world need help, and you can do something about it."

"I don't buy it," Janet said.

I couldn't meet her eyes.

The subway halted with the shrillness of shattering glass, and the riders swayed forward, then snapped back into place when it stopped. The man pushed his way to the door, holding the drum upside down, exposing the open bottom to donations. I noticed now that he had a limp. His left leg

moved well, but his right leg dragged behind. He looked from face to face, hobbling, holding out the drum. The drum remained empty.

When our eyes met, the ice and the chill hit me again, but I didn't look away this time. The frozen impact simmered, then it smoldered, then it seared, as though it would burn a hole in my pocket. I scowled. I wanted to hate the man for stoking this feeling, but then I saw Janet's tight lips, her steely eyes. Her rancor and mine weren't the same breed. I couldn't hate the man. I couldn't hate his drum.

The man ducked through the door and stood on the platform waiting for his next audience. We rolled away in silence.

After some more stops, the number of riders had reduced and our station crept closer.

"You have the metro card so we can get back, right?" Janet said.

I spread open my wallet and plucked through a pile of old receipts. The metro card wasn't there.

"I must have dropped it at the other station," I said.

"Just buy another one," Janet said.

"It's always that easy for you, isn't it?" I said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Janet said.

"Nothing," I said. "I'll buy us a new one when we get there."